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ABSTRACT

Research has found that individuals present themselves in a self-enhancing fashion when audiences lack information that could contradict their claims. To examine reactions to evaluations and the potential interplay between the valence of the evaluation, the public versus private nature of the response, and the audience to whom a public response is addressed, subjects received a positive or negative evaluation of their emotional maturity from a peer. Evaluations were based on subjects' answers to an emotional maturity test and were described as either more or less subjective in nature. The subjects then responded privately or to the evaluator or an observer. As hypothesized, subjects lowered their public self-ratings on evaluation-relevant attributes after receiving a negative evaluation, thereby maintaining consistency with publicly known facts and avoiding the risk of a public challenge. The effect was most pronounced when the reaction was seen by the evaluator, and the evaluation was objective. Private self-ratings on relevant attributes were not significantly affected by the valence of the evaluation. Contrary to expectations, subjects did not publicly compensate for a negative evaluation by presenting themselves more positively on irrelevant attributes. Subjects also derogated the negative evaluator in all conditions, even when the evaluator saw their assessment. The findings suggest that the conditions under which compensation occurs are not yet clear. (Author/JAC)

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SELF-PRESENTATIONAL REACTIONS TO INTERPERSONAL EVALUATIONS

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Self-Presentational Reactions to Interpersonal Evaluations

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Problem. People's reactions to interpersonal evaluations can serve self-presentational functions. It has been found that people usually react more favorably to positive than negative evaluations (Jones, 1973: Mettee & Aronson, 1974); they thereby affirm evaluations that maximize their esteem and reject ones that threaten it. One exception occurs when people believe negative evaluations are legitimate and would be confirmed by information that is publicly known (Jones, 1973). Under such conditions, rejecting the negative evaluation could prove embarrassing and result in an overall loss of esteem, so people accept it.

Such findings are compatible with the self-presentation literature. People present themselves in a self-enhancing fashion when audiences lack information that could contradict their claims (Baumeister & Jones, 1978; Schlenker, 1975, 1980). They present themselves consistently, however, with publicly known information, lowering their claims to relevant attributes when the audience is aware of negative information about them. People also attempt to compensate for public failure and recoup lost esteem through self-enhancing presentations on attributes that are irrelevant to the failure and hence would not be directly contradicted by it (Baumeister & Jones, 1978).

Reactions to evaluations should be affected by the interplay between the valence of the evaluation, the public versus private nature of the response,

and the audience to whom a public response is addressed. In the present experiment, subjects received a positive or negative evaluation of their emotional maturity from a peer. The evaluation was based on their answers to an emotional maturity test, and was described as either more or less subjective in nature. They then responded privately or to either the evaluator or an observer (who also viewed their test and knew of the evaluation but whose own opinion of subjects was unknown).

It was expected that self-descriptions on relevant attributes would conform more to the evaluation publicly, where overly enhancing self-descriptions could be challenged, than privately. Also, self-presentations should be somewhat less constrained by a negative evaluation when subjects are responding to the observer than to the evaluator, and when the evaluation is seen as more subjective and thus idiosyncratic. Subjects who receive negative evaluations should also publicly compensate for this negative image by presenting themselves very positively on attributes irrelevant to the evaluation. Finally, subjects should prefer positive over negative evaluators, with the greatest derogation of the latter occurring privately.

Subjects. One hundred eighty (90 male, 90 female) introductory psychology students partially fulfilled a course requirement by participating; experimental sessions were run using same-sex triads.

Procedure. Subjects were escorted to separate rooms and informed via written instructions that the experimenter was interested in the informational aspects of the acquaintanceship process. As such, there would first be an information exchange, than an impression formation stage, and finally an opportunity to interact directly with the others on a mixed-motive task. To simplify the impression formation task, subjects supposedly would be randomly assigned to either (a) supply information about themselves to the two others, (b) form an impression of the person who supplied the information, or (c)

observe the processs and see all exchanged materials but not directly participate in it. In actuality, all subjects were assigned the role of supplying information about themselves. To minimize the experimenter's potential as an evaluator, subjects read that a research assistant would code the anonymous task materials after the entire study was completed and the experimenter would never see any of the information that was exchanged; to lend credibility to this statement, all information exchanges were accomplished via sealed envelopes.

Subjects then completed a bogus but face valid paper-and-pencil test of emotional maturity that consisted of 25 agree-disagree items (e.g., "I'm rarely given to emotional outbursts") and a single 19-point scale with labeled endpoints of "extremely emotionally mature" and "extremely emotionally immature." It was explained that their responses would be seen by both the evaluator and the observer. While the evaluator was ostensibly forming an impression of them based on their responses, subjects read that the test does not provide a single numerical score; and (but) conclusions drawn from it were either largely subjective or largely objective in nature. Subjects then received an evaluation of their emotional maturity that was either very favorable or very unfavorable (the evaluator described them as either more or less mature than they said they were and rated them 3 scale units above or below their self-rating, respectively).

Subjects then completed a questionnaire that requested self-ratings (on 19-point scales) on six attributes labeled "relevant traits" (e.g., dependable) and nine labeled "qualities separate from emotional maturity" (e.g., intelligent), as well as their perceptions of the evaluator (13-point scales). (Pretesting showed that the relevant traits were rated as relevant to emotional maturity while the irrelevant traits were not.) The instructions atop the

questionnaire explained that it would be seen only by (a) the evaluator, (b) the observer, or (c) the research assistant who would code the anonymous data; appropriate justifications were provided for each.

Three control conditions, one for each of the audience groups, were comprised of subjects who did not receive an evaluation. Thus, the experiment was a 2 (evaluation) by 2 (subjectivity) by 3 (audience) factorial design, with three offset control groups.

Results. The manipulations were effective in producing the desired perceptions of the evaluation, its subjectivity, and who would see the questionnaires, $ps < .001$.

To control for initial self-perceptions, analyses of covariance were conducted with subjects' initial self-ratings of emotional maturity as the covariate. A MANCOVA performed on the six attributes relevant to emotional maturity revealed a main effect of the valence of the evaluation, $p < .001$, and an interaction of the evaluation, subjectivity, and audience, $p < .01$. Means for three of the items that revealed univariate interactions are presented in Table 1.

MANCOVA simple effects tests showed that, in general, public self-descriptions were more favorable following a positive than negative evaluation. This consistency effect was strongest within the evaluator-audience condition, $ps < .01$, and was not qualified by evaluation subjectivity. The effect was muted in an interesting fashion within the observer-audience condition, where a simple interaction of the evaluation and its subjectivity was obtained, $p < .01$. Univariate tests showed than on half the items, subjects presented themselves more favorably to the observer following a positive than negative objective evaluation, with no significant effect of the evaluation when it was subjective; on the other three items, the reverse occurred,

with a significant consistency effect in the subjective condition only. Overall, this pattern produced significant multivariate simple-simple effects of the evaluation in both the subjective and objective observer-audience conditions, $ps < .01$. Thus, although subjects who responded to the observer maintained consistency with the evaluation, they did so on only half the items, perhaps being reluctant to lower self-presentations uniformly following derogation but still feeling compelled to acknowledge the negative evaluation. Finally, subjects who responded anonymously did not show significant effects of the evaluation or its subjectivity.

Viewing the interaction another way, subjects who received positive feedback did not vary their self-ratings as a function of the audience or subjectivity. However, those who received a negative, objective evaluation were more self-effacing when they described themselves to the evaluator as compared to anonymously, $p < .05$. As seen above, subjects who presented themselves to the observer alternated between self-enhancing and self-effacing ratings following a negative evaluation, $ps < .05$, demonstrating ambivalence following derogation.

The irrelevant attributes comprised three groups: power (e.g., leader), attractiveness (e.g., likeable) and intellectual ability (e.g., intelligent). Main effects of the evaluation were obtained on each, $ps < .03$, with subjects presenting themselves more favorably following a positive than negative evaluation. These effects were not qualified by the audience and failed to support the predicted compensatory self-enhancement following a negative evaluation.

As expected, subjects derogated the negative evaluator. Main effects of the evaluation, $ps < .001$, showed that subjects who received a positive evaluation thought the evaluator was more competent in assessing emotional maturity

($\underline{M}$ = 10.4) and more likeable ($\underline{M}$ = 10.6) than those who received a negative evaluation ($\underline{M}$s = 6.2 and 8.1, respectively). However, no other effects of the independent variables were obtained.

Conclusions. As predicted, public self-ratings on the relevant attributes were consistent with the evaluation subjects received; the effect was most pronounced in the evaluator-audience condition, intermediate due to mixed self-ratings across items in the observer-audience condition, and insignificant privately. In addition, the audience affected relevant self-ratings only following a negative evaluation; public conformity with the feedback was maximal when subjects presented themselves to the evaluator who had delivered an objective evaluation. Thus, subjects did not appear to internalize the evaluations, but instead conformed to negative ones when an immediate audience would be aware of deviations that might look defensive and egotistical. After receiving a positive evaluation, subjects did not publicly raise their self-ratings, perhaps feeling secure in their public esteem and wishing to avoid the appearance of braggadocio.

Contrary to predictions, no evidence was found for compensatory self-presentation on the irrelevant attributes; in fact, the reverse occurred. Since the present procedure was closely patterned after that employed by Baumeister and Jones (1978), the finding is puzzling. An earlier attempt to replicate the effect also resulted in a failure to find compensation (Schlenker, Miller, & Leary, Note 1). Although compensation is an intuitively plausible and potentially efficacious tactic, the conditions under which it occurs are not yet clear.

As expected, ratings of the evaluator were more favorable following positive than negative evaluations. Interestingly, though, the effect was not qualified by audience. Subjects were thus willing to derogate the evaluator publicly. It is not clear whether this represents simply an affective expression or a more calculated attempt to display their disfavor.

Reference Notes

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Table 1

Self-Presentations of Maturity-Relevant Attributes

As a Function of Evaluation, Subjectivity, and Audience

Dependent Variable and Audience Condition	Evaluation Condition				Control
	Positive		Negative		
	Subjective	Objective	Subjective	Objective	
Emotionally Consistent					
Evaluator	15.3_{afl}	14.1_{bfq}	11.8^{*}_{cim}	11.3^{*}_{dir}	14.6_{u}
Observer	14.6_{agn}	13.2_{bgs}	11.6^{*}_{cjo}	13.2_{ejs}	14.6_{u}
Anonymous	14.1_{ahp}	14.2_{bht}	13.5_{ckp}	13.9_{ekt}	13.2_{u}
Thoughtful					
Evaluator	14.1_{afl}	13.3_{bfo}	13.8_{cil}	13.3_{deio}	11.7_{s}
Observer	13.6_{agm}	15.3^{*}_{bgp}	13.0_{cjm}	11.7_{ejq}	12.3_{s}
Anonymous	14.4_{ahn}	13.8_{bhr}	12.8_{ckn}	13.9_{dkr}	13.8_{s}
Competent in Expressing Emotion					
Evaluator	13.8_{afm}	13.5_{bfq}	12.0_{cim}	11.9_{diq}	12.1_{t}
Observer	15.6_{agn}	12.5_{bgr}	11.5_{cjo}	14.7_{ekr}	14.5_{t}
Anonymous	14.0_{ahp}	14.2_{bhs}	13.1_{clp}	13.6_{dels}	12.9_{t}

Note. Higher means indicate more positive self-presentations. Means in each set without a commom subscript differ, $p < .05$, by multivariate tests of simple effects or, for pairwise comparisons, by the least significant difference procedure. (Means denoted by an asterisk differ from overall control means, Ms = 14.1, 12.9, and 13.2, respectively, $ps < .05$).